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Into Europe

The system of 'imperial preference' in British trade which had been declared in the 1932 Import Duties Act continued after the Second World War. In the 1950s Britain still enjoyed strong trading connections with the Commonwealth countries, but there was much feeling that the nation's trading relationships should be more fully developed in Europe.

Treaty of Rome 1957

In 1957 the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community which aimed to create a large European 'free trade area'. Initial British reluctance to seek membership of the Community was set aside by a decline in economic performance in the late 1950s, as compared with other European countries. In 1960 a British application to join the Community was rejected. A new application was made in 1967 and negotiations eventually began in October 1970.

The question of whether Britain should sign the Treaty of Accession was debated in the House of Commons in October 1971. Domestic opinion was strongly against membership and there was strong concern over whether the terms negotiated were good enough for Britain. Doubts over many issues affecting Britain's future were aired in a debate that lasted six days.

Britain Joins the European Economic Community

The Treaty was signed by Edward Heath, the British Prime Minister, in Brussels on 22 January 1972. The European Communities Bill was then introduced in the House of Commons to give parliamentary assent to Britain's membership of the EEC. Although the bill itself consisted of only 12 clauses (accepting all previous EEC regulations, the Treaty of Rome, and the terms of entry), it was subject to some 300 hours of debate before becoming law.

Britain's membership of what was then primarily an economic union came into effect on 1 January 1973. Since then the Community has developed into a much broader entity, the European Union, which was formally created by the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992. The terms of Britain's agreement to the Treaty received parliamentary approval in the European Communities (Amendment) Act of 1993, and the Union came into force in November 1993.

Related information

Historic Hansard

The House of Commons debates whether the UK should join the European Economic Community

The House of Commons debates the Second Reading of the European Communities Bill

- [European Communities Bill \(15 February 1972\)](#).

The House of Commons debates the Third Reading of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill

- [European Communities \(Amendment\) Bill \(20 May 1993\)](#).
- [European Communities \(21 October 1971\)](#).
- [European Communities Bill \(15 February 1972\)](#).
- [European Communities \(Amendment\) Bill \(20 May 1993\)](#).

Biography

You can access a biography of

Edward Heath

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- [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#).

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